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Exploring young children's 'racial' attitudes in an Australian context – the link between research and practice.

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Exploring young children's 'racial' attitudes in an Australian context – the link between research and practice.

Abstract

This paper is based on the research project conducted recently in WA that aimed to contribute to a better understanding of young children's 'racial' awareness and prejudice. Children's 'racial' attitudes have been of researchers interest for a considerable number of years, in Australia however this topic has been, until recently, relatively unexplored (see Palmer, 1991; Black-Gutman and Hicks, 1996; MacNaughton, 2001).

This project used a phenomenological, qualitative approach in order to explore in the most possible natural and developmentally appropriate way how young children perceive and interpret 'racial' differences. The study involved a small sample of children aged 3, 5 and 7 years from an European-Australian background who were randomly selected from two childcare centres and one school in WA and examined their perception and evaluation of difference in relation to Asian, European and Aboriginal - Australian children.

The study findings appear to indicate the importance of environmental rather than cognitive factors in the development of children's 'racial' attitudes. It suggests that children start absorbing prevailing social attitudes early in their life and that environmental-learning factors play a significant role in how children perceive and evaluate difference. These research findings appear to confirm some earlier results of studies conducted overseas (see Ramsey 1991; Katz, 1987) as well as in Australia (Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996; MacNaughton, 2001).

Introduction to the study.

'Race' and racism have a long and controversial tradition. As Van Horne (1996, p.20) stated they can be found "among the most malodorous and disgusting concepts", as common at the beginning of the 21st century as they were in the past.

Despite the scientific evidence that 'race' has no objective, biological meaning and the experiences of the Second World War – which removed the cover of righteousness from the concept of 'natural' superiority of certain races - the concepts of 'race' and racism persist. Society continues to place more importance on some dimensions of physical and non-physical features than others when categorising people. 'Racial' cues appear to be chosen as particularly significant during this process of categorisation.

The fact that we consistently use certain physical characteristics (such as skin colour) to define 'race', but ignore others (such as the size of ears) shows that the creation of 'race' concept is the result of social need rather than a biological fact. 'Races' are a product of a social process, an a priori division of humankind into discrete groups, whose existence is subsequently rationalised by society through a set of certain physical characteristics (Malik, 1996, p.5). As Miles (1989, p.70) asserts, 'race' as a category is entirely imagined (brought into existence) through the process of signification in the representation of 'others' in the social discourse. How human kind is divided depends on how people choose to represent other people. Such process of signification contributes to an inclusion or exclusion of certain groups of people in the process of allocating resources and services. What follows is that such process of signification provides basis for the creation of a hierarchy of groups and justification for the existing social order. Some writers (Miles, 1989) argue therefore that the category of 'race', should be removed from a social discourse.

Although it is difficult to deny the validity of the above argument, there are a number of valid reasons for retaining the category of 'race' in social discourse. One of these reasons is, that we still live in the world where members of certain social groups, which are usually minority groups, face many different forms of racism on a regular basis. This happens regardless of whether the term 'race' is used in the social discourse.

Racism can be understood at many different levels. The term is frequently used in relation to ideology, social practice and to individual attitudes of racial prejudice. Although 'race' and racism have changed their form in the last twenty years, as the phenotypical obviousness used in the arguments of the old, crude racism has been replaced with the cultural one in the discourse of 'new racism' (Barker, 1981; Miles, 1989; Gillborn, 1995, Burnett, 2001), the practice and its social function remain the same. It appears that 'race' and racism persist as they have social value and social utility for those who have been beneficiaries of 'racial inheritance' and struggle to maintain their 'superior position' in society (Van Horne, 1997, p.9).

Many beliefs about different socially constructed groups are transmitted from one

generation to another. Adults' 'racial' prejudice appears to be difficult to change even in the light of conflicting evidence and experience. This strongly suggests that predispositions acquired during early years of life may form strong foundations for racism (Katz, 1982, p.18). In order to deal with racism therefore it seems important to explore how racial attitudes are acquired.

The acquisition of race concept and attitudes in very young children has been of researchers' interest for a number of years. The majority of research procedures to study this topic however have been used and developed overseas and related to North American, Canadian or European contexts. For that reason their generalisability to Australian context is difficult to assess. In Australia, apart from a limited number of studies (Palmer, 1990; Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996; MacNaughton & Davis, 2001), the topic of racism and very young children remains relatively unexplored. We have a limited information about how Australian children construct their understanding of 'racial' differences.

Although both classical and more recent research findings indicate that children develop 'racial' prejudice at an early age, the relative role of cognitive versus environmental factors in development of negative 'racial' attitudes is still not clear. Many researchers (Aboud, 1988; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Katz, 1976; Ramsey, 1987) who adopt social-cognitive perspective, suggest that children's 'racial' prejudice should be attributed to their immature cognition. Such a perspective appears to provide support for the ideology of 'new racism', where 'to be prejudiced is quite simply to be human' (Honeyford, cited in Hopkins, Reicher & Levine, 1997, p.310).

Other studies (Davey, 1983; Downey, 1998, Katz, 1987, Ramsey, 1991, Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996, MacNaughton & Davis, 2001) emphasise the importance of environmental factors in formation of 'racial prejudice'. These studies indicate that children start absorbing social attitudes early in their life and point to socialisation, rather than individual cognitive processes, as a critical factor that contributes to development of highly prejudiced children.

Although the process of acquisition of 'racial' attitudes is similar to the formation of other attitudes (Katz, 1982) and therefore should not be analysed independently of other ongoing internal processes of the child, their development must be viewed as a consequence of children's socialisation within a society where racist attitudes prevail (Milner, 1983). Racism is a consequence of social processes and institutional structures rather than individual tendency to categorise.

As Australia is a 'multi-racial' society, cultural awareness and development of positive intergroup relations and tolerance are contributing factors to its natural perpetuation. Despite their importance however, it appears that racism, although 'cultural' not biological, persists in our society. The 1980s and 1990s race debate led by professor Geoffrey Blainey and politicians such as Pauline Hanson, eagerly accepted by large segments of the Australian public, seem to prove that although we replaced 'race' with 'culture' and 'nation', our social discourse has not moved very far from the colonial past and the later policy of assimilation.

In order to deal with issues of racism in our society, it seems to be important to explore how young Australian children construct 'racial' differences and consider some possible social factors that contribute to development of 'racial prejudice'.

For the above reasons, this study aimed to explore Anglo-Australian children's perception, evaluation and social preferences towards differences perceived as 'racial'. An awareness of 'racial' differences appears to be a necessary element for the formation of 'racial' attitudes (whether positive or negative). Logically, to be prejudiced, one must first notice difference for which the like or dislike is to be developed. Both prejudiced and unprejudiced children notice the same differences, they just do not react in the same way to them (Aboud, 1988). This provides empirical evidence that 'race' awareness does not lead to prejudice. On the contrary, some recent research findings (Downey, 1998) indicate that discussing race with young children can result in the development of less biased racial attitudes.

For that reason, my research intended to contribute to a better understanding of how early Australian children start noticing racial differences, when they develop their racial preferences and how they evaluate people from various 'racial' backgrounds. Such understanding may help to establish how early young children may become racially prejudiced and, for that reason, when and how, appropriate strategies should be developed and used to adequately address such issues. If racial attitudes are socially constructed (Triandis, 1971, Milner, 1983), the learning environments within a variety of children's microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such as family, children services or schools can positively impact their development.

Research questions.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do young children perceive differences between people?
- Do young children use 'race' as a dominating category in structuring perceptions of self and others?
- Do young children demonstrate 'racial' preferences?
- Is there a consistency of preferences in relation to different 'racial' groups?
- How do children evaluate 'racial' differences?

Methodology.

In order to analyse the above, a qualitative method that provided an opportunity for a richer, more in-depth data collection and analysis was employed. A phenomenological approach was used to examine attitudes of Euro-Australian children toward three broadly defined groups from Euro-Australian, Asian-Australian and Aboriginal-Australian background. As the

same groups have been targeted in another Australian study (Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996), it appeared interesting to establish if similar patterns of children's attitudes towards these groups can be also observed.

Study sample.

For the purpose of this study twelve children from European-Australian background, who spoke English as their first language, have been randomly selected from two child care centres and one school in Perth, WA. Both childcare centres as well as the school, were located in culturally and socio-economically diverse areas. These areas have been targeted to ensure that all the study participants had some direct contact (possibly at various levels of involvement) with members of different ethnic groups.

As one of the aims of this study was to explore possible age differences in children's perception of race, racial preferences and evaluation, children from three different age groups (3 year old, 5 year old and 7 year old) were selected. Two girls and two boys represented each age group.

Research method.

This study attempted to explore the phenomenon of 'racial' attitudes in young children in the most possible natural and developmentally appropriate way. All the participants were interviewed individually by a researcher at the child care centres and the selected school. To increase the accuracy, richness and reliability of data collection the interviews were videotaped. The intention behind the videotaping was to capture not only children's verbal responses, but also their body language (gestures, hesitation, eye contact) in order to reveal the possibility of children providing socially desirable answers.

To reduce the risk of eliciting untrue responses due to "stranger anxiety", the researcher met all the children prior to interview sessions. The youngest participants (3 year olds) were met on several occasions. All the participants were screened for classification skills and their understanding of concepts "same" and "different" prior to the interview sessions, in order to ensure their ability to perform the categorising tasks.

In order to explore children's responses to racial differences, the participants were presented with a set of twelve photographs of children from three broadly defined groups from European-Australian, Aboriginal-Australian and Asian-Australian background. Two sets of photographs have been developed for the purpose of this study to match the age of the participants and the children in the photographs as closely as possible. Photographs of four children and an equal number of boys and girls represented each of the targeted 'racial' groups. Each of the photographs showed a child's head and shoulders dressed in everyday casual clothes.

In order to address the question of whether children have a generalised reaction to people who look different from themselves (Sigelman et.al, 1986), or whether they make distinctions among 'racially' different groups, photographs of children within each of the racial groups varied significantly in either skin tone, or hair and eye colour. The European-Australian children were represented by one couple with light hair and light eyes and the other with dark hair and dark eyes. The Asian-Australian group was represented by photographs of two children from Chinese background, with relatively light skin colour and two Indian children (two Kurdish children for the older age group) whose skin tone was much darker. Similarly, within the Aboriginal-Australian group, there were two photographs of children with rather light skin and hair and two with much darker skin and hair colour.

During the interviews all children were asked to undertake a series of tasks:

1. At the beginning of the first interview the individual participants were presented with all the photographs and asked if they knew or seen anybody who looked like that. The purpose of this part of the interview was to determine the participants' familiarity with children from different ethnic backgrounds and to establish the level of their personal relevance.

2. The next part of this interview focussed on the way children categorised others. All the participants were presented here with the photographs in the sets of three. Each triad consisted of children of both genders who represented different ethnic backgrounds. Children were asked to physically place the photographs of children into two groups, those who looked similar and the one who looked different. After doing that, the participants were asked to clarify their choices. The choice of the photographs in each set allowed children to use a variety of categorising characteristics such as gender, facial structure, skin or hair colour, or some more transitory attributes such as hair style, jewelry or clothing. This task was to explore what type of cues children predominantly use during the process of categorising others.

3. In order to establish how children perceived differences between themselves and others, all the participants were presented with all the photographs placed in front of them on the table and asked to select as many photographs as they wanted of children who looked like them. After they selected them physically by placing them on the "like me" or "not like me" circle, they have been asked to justify their choices.

4. A similar procedure was used to explore children's racial preferences. As before, all photographs were placed in front of the participants, who were asked to choose those children, they would like to play with, or have as a friend. Presenting children with all the photographs at once eliminated the risk of a forced choice. Again, the participants had a choice of selecting as many, or as few photographs as they decided to. After physically selecting the photographs and placing them into two groups, the participants were asked to clarify their choices.

5. The second interview aimed to explore how children evaluated racial differences. For that reason, the participants were asked to describe, by a set of adjectives (choice of positive and negative ones), the same children whose photographs were presented to them during the first interview. To establish the shared meaning of the descriptive terms between the interviewer and the participants, they were decided upon during the story reading session, which preceded the interview. This interview was to establish whether or not consistent patterns of evaluation in relation to different 'racial' groups could be found.

Although the second interview was originally designed to be used with all children, the pre-interview session with the three-year-olds revealed that they were not able to understand this task. For that reason the second interview was only conducted with the five and seven year old children.

Data analysis.

All the interviews were transcribed and an inductive analysis was used to identify patterns, themes and categories that emerged from the data. A case studies approach was adopted to allow for an in-depth analysis. Raw data from each of the interviews was edited, parts fitted together and case record was organised topically. The following themes, which derived from research questions, have been identified:

- children's perception of difference
- perception of similarity and difference between 'myself and others',
- social preferences
- evaluation of 'racial' differences

The final report consisted of several case studies. As the scope of this paper does not permit such presentation however, a brief overview of some identified patterns within the research themes will be presented with emphasis on the changes in dimension and meaning that were observed in relation to age.

Results and discussion.

Perception of difference.

The individual interviews revealed that all children, including the youngest ones, whose age ranged from 3.4 to 3.9 years, appeared to notice 'racial' differences between other children and between themselves and others. The most common 'racial' characteristic used by the participants was skin colour, referred to as 'face colour', 'colour of cheeks' or 'colour of skin'. Within the 3-year-old group however, with the exception of one participant, 'racial' cues did not seem to be more salient than other categorising characteristics such as gender, hair colour or some more superficial attributes such as clothing.

Salience of 'racial' cues appeared to increase with age. In both 5 and 7-year-old groups some children predominantly used skin colour as a differentiating characteristic during the tasks of categorising themselves and others. In addition, some of the seven year olds also made explicit references to other 'racial' cues, such as belonging to a different group ('coming from another country'), 'racial' physiognomy ("the same eyes" or "the same look", or even the "the same smile"). Some of their comments may suggest that these children were dividing people in discrete groups according to their physical characteristics, although they applied ethnic labels in relation to such perceived groups only some of the time. Following is a comment made by the seven-year-old girl in relation to a set of photographs of a European-Australian girl and two Aboriginal-Australian children (a girl and a boy):

Researcher: Could you tell me which of these three children
go together?

Lisa: These two go together (*Aboriginal girl and a boy*) because

... mmm, because of their hair... (*all three children had dark hair*)

Researcher: Because of their hair?

Lisa: ... and the look. They look... kind of different people.

Researcher: Why is that Lisa?

Lisa: Because she could be an Aboriginal and so could he.

Researcher: How do you know that they could be Aboriginal?

Lisa: Because they look like it.

Researcher: What makes them look Aboriginal?

Could you tell me?

Lisa: The colour of their skin. And their smile. (*only the Aboriginal girl, not the boy, was smiling*)

Researcher: Their smile? But this girl smiles as well (pointing to the photo of the European-Australian child).

Lisa: Yes, but it is different.

Researcher: Why is it different?

Lisa: Because... (looks at the photo, hesitates moves her face closer to the photograph)... her teeth are a bit different to hers.

It seemed that this girl perceived Aboriginal people as being different to others (European-Australians) even in the way they smiled. It was interesting to observe how she tried to think of a convincing explanation to justify her statement about the 'difference in smiles' and how she talked about 'their smile' (meaning both Aboriginal children), despite the fact that the Aboriginal boy in this photograph was not smiling. It was also interesting to see how Lisa excluded some other differences such as gender during this categorising task, although, later on, she used it on several occasions.

A similar tendency was also observed within the five-year-old children. One of the boys within this group for example, applied the skin colour cue to each of the seven sets of photographs presented to him despite the gender differences that were present in each set. When asked to differentiate between a set of photos of three children, two Aboriginal-Australians (a girl and a boy) and an Indian-Australian boy, he stated: "There is no difference (between them). They are all the same Same dark skin". It appeared interesting that he did not notice any differences between these children, as if the similar colour of skin made them all the same. It is possible that he accentuated 'racial' cues so much that was unable to see other differentiating characteristics. This appears to confirm the findings of Aboud & Skerry (1984) who claim that children who emphasise intergroup differences experience difficulties seeing others as individuals.

Another interesting pattern observed during the task of categorising others was that children appeared not to notice quite significant differences in the tones of skin colour. They referred to skin complexion of all children other than European-Australian as 'dark' or 'black', despite quite significant variations presented to them. A three-year-old girl stated for example that the Aboriginal boy with a rather dark complexion and a Chinese girl are 'the same' as they have 'black cheeks and necks'. One of the ways of explaining this may be her immature cognition. As similar patterns have been observed during the interviews with the 5 and 7 year old children however, it can be also suggested that even at such an early age children start classifying people into two categories: those who have white skin, and those who have not. The latter appeared to be 'all the same'.

Social preferences.

Although 'racial' cues were frequently used by children in both self categorising and categorising others tasks, they were not necessarily consistently linked to children's potential friendship (play) choices. Such tendency was observed in all age groups. This suggests that using 'racial' classification (noticing racial differences) does not necessarily imply certain 'racial' preferences (whether negative or positive). It has been found however that salience of 'racial' cues during categorising tasks appeared to correspond with social preferences. Some five and seven year olds and one three year old, who consistently used 'racial' attributes as differentiating characteristics, also made negative potential friendship choices in relation to peers who they perceived as 'racially' different. A three year old girl who demonstrated salience of 'racial' cues during categorising tasks also expressed her dislike towards most of the children from groups other than European-Australian. On many occasions she stated that she 'did not like them' and that she 'would not like to play with them' as they all had 'black skin' or 'skin not like mine'. Her dislike was expressed not only through verbal responses, but also through body language (turning the photographs over, pushing them away from her body) and physical classification of photographs (placing them on 'not like me' and 'I would not like to play with' circles).

Although children in all age groups used 'racial' characteristics as a differentiating category, some of the older children appeared to be uncomfortable to readily discuss it. This was observed during the tasks of categorising self and others, but was especially true in relation to their social preferences. This seemed even more interesting, as in relation to social preferences gender was mentioned quite frequently. One of the five-year-old girls for example openly justified her negative friendship choices in relation to the photographs of all boys that were presented to her. The only girls however that she selected as potential playmates from the choice of six, were two European-Australians, while girls whom she classified as those she would not like to play with were from Indian, Chinese and Aboriginal background. This is how she justified her choice:

Researcher: Why would you like to play with these two children?

Natalie: Because they both have short hair.

Researcher: But this one has got rather long hair. Hasn't she?

Natalie: It does not matter.

Researcher: It does not matter. You still would like to play with these two girls.

Natalie: Mhm (*nods her head*)

In relation to the photograph of the Aboriginal-Australian girl, Natalie stated:

Researcher: Why wouldn't you like to play with this girl?

Natalie: Because (hesitates) I will play with my friends.

Researcher: But if your friends went away on holidays, would you like to play with this one?

Natalie: I would play by myself.... and with my little sister.

It appeared that this child was either unable to verbally justify her choices, or she was avoiding it. This may be because, similarly to some of the other participants, she had started developing an awareness of social expectations. Talking openly about gender differences and choosing same gender playmates is socially acceptable in our society. Using 'racial' cues in relation to potential friendship choices however is not, especially since multiculturalism has been declared an official policy in our multi-racial country in 1970s.

According to Brown (1995), surveys of ethnic attitudes indicate a decline in prejudice in the last thirty years in countries such as USA, Australia and Great Britain. Some new, less reactive measures show however, that this decline seems to be a result of changing social desirability norms rather than internalised non-prejudiced beliefs. Dominant group members do not overtly express prejudice towards various ethnic groups, but this does not mean that prejudice does not exist. As children's attitudes are influenced by socialisation experiences, their willingness to openly discuss their social preferences may be influenced by the attitudes of adults with whom they frequently interact. Some of the responses of the participants of this study appeared to suggest such influences.

Not all children seemed apprehensive about openly stating their social preferences in relation to children who they perceived as 'racially' different. Interestingly however, they tried to justify their openly stated negative choices by 'blaming the others'. One seven-year-old boy for example, when asked about the reason he would not like to play with the Aboriginal-Australian girl stated the following:

Adam: Because she would not like to play with me.

Researcher: Why do you think she would not like to play with you?

Adam: Because brown people don't sort of play with whitish people.

When dealing with the photograph of a Chinese boy, this same child stated:

"I would not like to play with him because he is brown and he's got blackish hair (*hesitates*) because he would (*hesitates*) because he is too big for me. He would want to play with his own size and bully me".

Another child, this time a five year old girl, justified her negative friendship choices in relation to two boys from European-Australian background and an Aboriginal boy with fairly light complexion by shrugging her shoulders and stating there was no particular reason for her choice. In relation to an Indian, Chinese and an Aboriginal boy with a dark skin however, she was able to clearly explain it. She stated that the boys looked 'silly', 'funny' and 'angry' and therefore she would not like to play with them. Although initially it appeared that her social preferences were influenced by gender cues only, 'racial' factors also played an important role. It also appeared that there was a link between the way she evaluated 'racial' differences and her potential friendship choices. Negative friendship choices were usually accompanied by negative evaluation of 'racially' different peers. Similar patterns were found during both interviews with some five and seven years old children.

Evaluation of difference.

A number of patterns have been identified in relation to children's evaluation of 'racial' differences. The first indicated that some participants perceived children from other than European-Australian backgrounds as being **inferior** to them. A seven-year-old girl for example stated that she would play with some of the girls who were perceived by her as 'racially' different as "she might not have enough food" or "because she might come from a different country and might not know any language". She said that it might be good for these children to play with her as it "might help them not to be shy" and "to learn another language". It appeared that she perceived herself as being superior to these children, as she did not talk about any advantages such play could bring for her. Other children also described some of their 'racially' different peers as being "funny", "silly", "annoying" and even "dirty" (the latter was used by a seven-year-old child in direct relation to the colour of skin).

Another pattern that was identified demonstrated that some children perceived their 'racially' different peers as a **threat**. When dealing with photographs of children from other than European-Australian background, they described them as having "mean eyes", and as being potentially "nasty", "not nice to them", or try to bully them. One of the seven-year-old children stated the following:

Child: I do not like playing with brown people, they are too brown for me... Because they might come from another country.

Researcher: Oh, so that's the reason.

Child: 'cause... um...um...brown country um... they have spears. And they could chuck it at me. My dad had a spear thrown at him when he went to another country.

Researcher: Really? Why did someone throw a spear at him?

Child: 'cause he is ... um... white.

It appears interesting to note that this child, similarly to some others, was incongruent in how he applied his evaluation to children with similar 'racial' characteristics. For example, although he negatively evaluated Aboriginal-Australian girls, he did not do so in relation to Aboriginal boys. This inconsistency may be a result of receiving different messages from different microsystems such as school, home and peers. Evidence obtained during the first interview also suggests that his direct positive interactions with children who looked similar to those in the photographs also influenced the way he evaluated them. For example his positive comments about Aboriginal-Australian boys, despite his derogatory general comments about "people with brown skin", appeared to be influenced by an Aboriginal-Australian playmate he talked about during the interview. Similar patterns have been also found between other children.

This research also demonstrated that children, who negatively evaluated their 'racially' different peers, usually did so in relation to all groups other than European-Australian. None of them appeared to be targeted more than others. Some of the seven-year-old participants

however used negative adjectives when describing Aboriginal children more consistently than in relation to others. This is what one of them said in relation to an Aboriginal girl:

Researcher: Do you think this girl is 'good' or 'naughty'?

Child: She is naughty because she is brown... and she is mean.

Researcher: Is she 'tidy' or 'messy'?

Child: She is messy. She looks messy because of her face. I know

Someone like that... that is brown and she is messy.

Such consistent negative evaluation based on skin colour characteristic, appears to suggest that this child started developing 'racial' prejudice and raises concerns in relation to messages he receives about people who are perceived as different.

Conclusion.

This research demonstrated that children as young as three years old used a number of physical characteristics including 'racial' cues when categorising people. Among the latter cues, the most common appeared to be skin colour, older children however, also applied other characteristics such 'racial' physiognomy or belonging to a certain 'racial' group.

Although nearly all children noticed 'racial' differences, such awareness was not necessarily linked to children's potential friendship choices or evaluation. Knowing about such differences did not seem to imply their negative evaluation. This seems to be consistent with 'racial' attitude development model proposed by Katz (1976), which suggests that during early childhood years different components of attitudes may develop independently.

However, it has been also found that some children who used 'racial' cues more often than any other characteristics during categorising tasks, ignored other differentiating factors and made consistent negative friendship choices in relation to children perceived as 'racially' different. This appears to suggest that even at such an early age some children accentuate 'racial' differences so much that they are unable to see others as individuals.

Salience of 'racial' cues and their negative evaluation seemed to increase with age; it has been found however that even at three years of age some children began to attach negative labels and feelings to such perceived differences. All the above appears to suggest that it is of prime importance to provide children with opportunities not only to become aware of 'racial' differences but also to see them as something important and valued.

Although all children demonstrated their awareness of 'racial' differences, with age they appeared to be more reluctant to openly discuss such differences as well as their feelings and social preferences towards them. This seems to demonstrate the important role of socialisation in the process of learning 'racial' attitudes. Children appear not only to absorb adults' attitudes towards difference at an early age; they also learn how socially appropriate or inappropriate it is to openly state them.

As some seven-year-old participants displayed their strong negative evaluation of 'racially' different peers and made negative potential friendship choices more consistently than the younger participants, it can be suggested that the environmental factors rather than immature cognition play crucial role in the development of prejudice.

Although based on a small sample, this research provides evidence that young European-Australian children demonstrate prejudice towards 'others' who they perceive as 'racially' different. Their selection of potential playmates and the negative evaluation of those they do not select as potential friends suggest that their attitudes might impact on their actual behaviour. As maintaining intergroup harmony of our multi-racial society is an important element for its natural perpetuation, addressing the issues of young children's 'racial' prejudice appears to be of importance.

As social factors seem to impact on how children see differences and how they respond to them, the role of teachers, caregivers and parents working together to help children develop positive attitudes is very important. There appears to be a need to develop long term preventative anti-racist programs, which take into account cultural and institutional structures that perpetuate racial prejudice (Burnett, 2001). Such programs need to adopt an anti-bias perspective and move away from a traditional 'tourist approach' where difference is 'visited' and then everyone returns to the 'usual' (Barnes, cited in Creaser & Dau, 1996, p.176). Efforts to challenge negative assumptions and to promote positive intergroup attitudes should start during the pre-school years.

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